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Thin Slice Judgment in Predicting Web Visitors' Behavior

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ABSTRACT

Stickiness of websites has been promoted as the predictor of web surfers' ultimate purchase of products or services. Longer website exposure leads to a higher probability that a purchase or use behavior will emerge. Furthermore, trustworthiness and emotional beliefs play an important role in online behavior. The question is how long does it take web surfers to form trustworthiness and emotional beliefs about a website that will influence future behavior? Using the concept of thin slice judgment, we posit that short glimpses of websites are accurate predictors of a web surfers' trustworthiness, emotional and stickiness beliefs. Psychology research has shown that people are fairly accurate in their predictive validity in judgments and decision making using "thin slices." We argue that thin slices could be a good predictor for a web visitor's trust and affective state, as well as the stickiness of a website. The use of thin slice judgments could assist website developers in developing websites that recognize the importance of thin slice judgments.

Keywords

Trust, time factor, e-commerce, thin slices, stickiness, emotion

INTRODUCTION

"Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted" Albert Einstein

How long does it take for web surfers to form their trustworthiness beliefs and emotions about a website in order to stay longer on the website and influence future visits and retention? Using the concept of thin slice judgment, we posit that short glimpses of websites are accurate predictors of web surfers' trustworthiness beliefs and feelings. Initial brief exposures to information are referred to as thin slices. Psychology research using thin slices suggest that people are remarkably accurate in their initial predictions and exhibit a great deal of predictive validity in their judgments and decision making using thin slices (Ambady and Rosenthal 1993; Ambady, Bernieri and Richeson, 2000).

Today over 80% of web surfers spend only a few seconds exploring a website before moving onto the next website (Tweedy 2002). In addition, the duration of a web page viewed by surfers in the U.S. is approximately fifty seconds (Nielsen-Netratings, 2005), suggesting that online consumers may be forming website judgments quickly after a brief exposure---thin slice judgments. The research question in this paper is whether thin slice judgments are good predictors of web visitors' trust, emotions and behavior. Such an insight could assist website designers in implementing web elements that could engender these beliefs and emotions within the initial time interval.

WHAT IS A THIN SLICE?

Many ordinary day-to-day impressions and judgments occur rapidly, unwittingly and intuitively and once these initial judgments are made they become the anchor from which subsequent judgments are made (Ambady et al., 2000). These first impressions are more accurate than one would initially expect. Research indicates that people are able to make fairly accurate judgments of other people on the basis of minimal interactions or glimpses of one another (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993). A thin slice is as a "brief excerpt of expressive behavior sampled from the behavior stream" (Ambady et al., 2000, p.203).

Thin slices have been sampled through a variety of channels of communication, including the face, the body, speech, the voice, transcripts, or combinations of the above (Ambady et al, 2000). In this research we argue that thin slices can be sampled from websites, since as a channel of communication websites exhibit dynamic features and interactivity that can display features necessary for thin slice judgments. Prior research has shown the predictive validity accuracy of thin slices

across a wide variety of contexts: predicting teacher success (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993), personality judgments (Lippa and Dietz, 2000), and love judgments (Aloni and Bernieri, 2004). We argue that there are thin-slice judgments about trusting beliefs, emotions and willingness to explore a website, which are formed in a matter of seconds. In what follows, we argue that the thin-slice judgment is a good predictor of the substantive beliefs and feelings, which are formed after lengthy explorations of and interactions with a website.

TRUST

Trust has been shown to play a significant role in online relationships, particularly under uncertain conditions such as the Internet (McKnight, Choudhury, and Kacmar, 2002). Online consumers are unlikely to transact with a website that fails to project a sense of trust. Trusting beliefs online have been found to form rather quickly (McKnight, Cummings, and Chervany, 1998), suggesting that online consumers could be using thin slice judgments early in their website evaluations.

Following the cognitive based trust literature, which suggests that trusting beliefs may form quickly before parties have meaningful information about each other (McKnight et al., 1998), this research will focus on initial trust. Initial trust refers to trust in an unfamiliar trustee, a relationship in which the actors do not yet have credible, meaningful information about, or affective bonds with each other (McKnight et al., 1998). Through an extensive review of prior trust literature, (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman, 1995) classified the components of trusting beliefs and suggests that competence, benevolence and integrity as dimensions of trustworthiness. In this paper, we distinguish initial trust from thin-slice trust judgment. Thin slice judgment is formed in a matter of seconds, whereas forming initial trust normally requires a relatively substantial exploration of a website. We argue that thin slice judgment is a good predictor of future trust (initial or recurrent) in the website.

Proposition 1: Thin slice judgment is a predictor of website visitors' trust in the website.

EMOTIONAL REACTION

Web surfing can often elicit emotional responses. Just as shopping enjoyment is important offline, it can be equally important online and help determine online loyalty (Jarvenpaa and Todd, 1997). Information systems research has suggested that intrinsic enjoyment can positively impact web usage over time (Novak, Hoffman, and Yung, 2000). In order to understand the emotional responses generated during the online experience we will apply the model of flow. Flow is defined as the holistic sensation that people feel when they act in total involvement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1977). When people are in flow, they become absorbed in their activity, their focus is narrowed, and thoughts are filtered out by a loss of self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1977). In the context of information systems research, Koufaris (2002) applied the model of flow and found that the emotional reaction to a website (intrinsic enjoyment, perceived control and focus) influenced the intention to return to a website in the future. It is expected that online consumers will be able to use their initial thin slice judgment to ignite an emotional reaction to the website.

Proposition 2: Thin slice judgment is a predictor of web visitors' emotional state with respect to a website.

STICKINESS

Customer retention is one of the basic goals of all businesses (Reichheld and Schefter, 2000). Stickiness of websites has been promoted as the predictor of web surfers' ultimate purchase of products or services. The fear in the online environment is that the inherent low switching costs enable competing online firms to be just a click away (Lee, Zufryden, and Dreze, 2003). Switching costs make consumer defection difficult or costly and include interpersonal relationships, perceived switching costs, and the attractiveness of alternatives (Jones Motherbaugh, and Beatty, 2000). As a result, the longer web surfers stay on a website, the higher is the probability that a purchase or use behavior will emerge (Dreze and Zufryden 1998). The goal is to encourage online consumers to be willing to stay and explore the website initially, which then should lead to repeat visitation and purchase. Companies who are able to increase the percentage of loyal customers by as little as 5% can increase profitability by as much as 30% to 85%, depending on the industry involved and this could be even higher on the Internet (Reichheld and Schefter, 2000). Chen and Hitt (2002) found that the initial perceived website quality had a direct effect on the switching of online consumers. Therefore initial reaction or thin slice judgment may be a significant factor in influencing the future willingness to use a website or promote stickiness to the website.

Proposition 3: Thin slice judgment is a predictor for the stickiness of the website for the visitor.

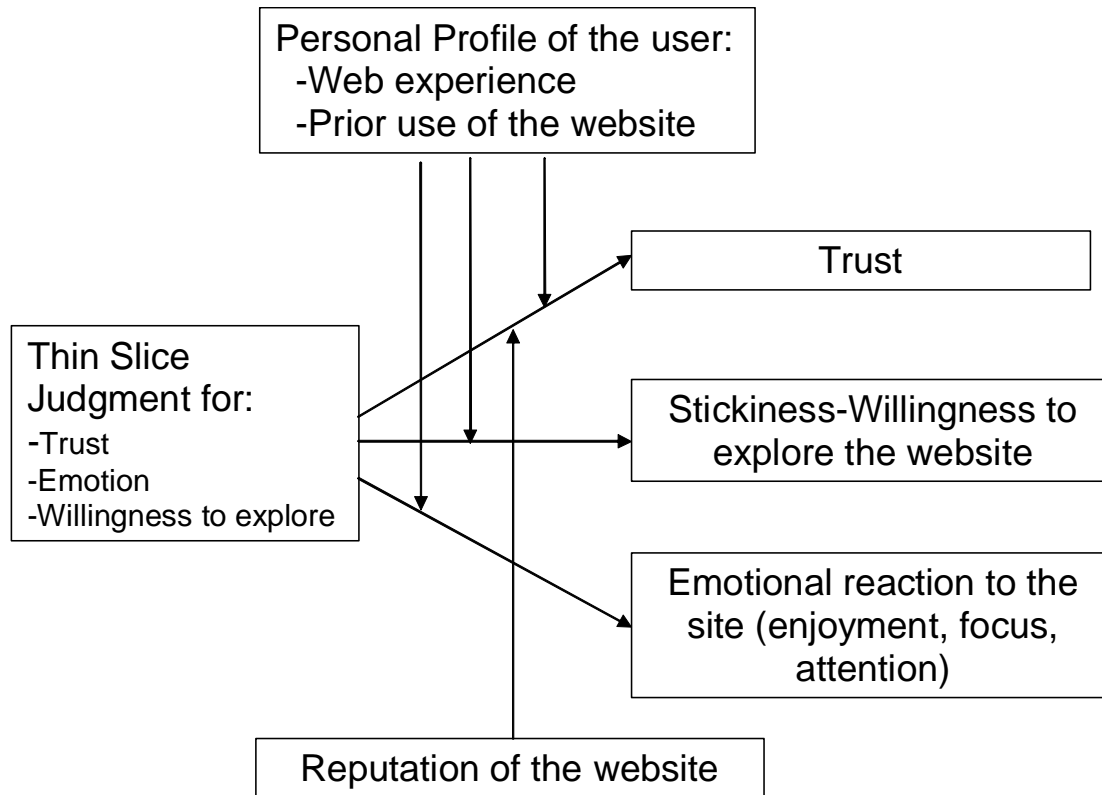


Figure 1. Thin Slice Judgment Model

Previous research has shown that a number of factors may affect, either positively or negatively, online shoppers' behavior (Balasubramanian, S., Konana, P., and Menon, N. M., 2003, Chen and Hitt, 2002). Based on these previous findings we propose that the personal profile of the web user, consisting of: web experience, prior use of the website, age, gender, income level, educational level and culture, along with the reputation of the website will serve as moderators to the hypothesized relationships, as shown in Figure 1.

METHOD

An experiment will be conducted to evaluate thin slice judgments. An experiment method was selected methods given the characteristics of the phenomenon and the needs for controlling multiple confounding variables. Thin slice judgments will be collected for trust, emotion and stickiness evaluations. During the experiment participants will be required to complete a profile questionnaire in order to control for the users web experience, prior knowledge or use of the website and to control for any impact the perceived reputation of the website may have on their evaluations. The participants of this study will be college students.

The trust measurement items will be adapted from McKnight et al., (2002), emotional items from Koufaris (2002). Stickiness will be measured subjectively (with new items) and objectively (time spent on the website). Websites will be selected based on criterion ratings performed by three experts who will provide their trusting belief ratings, emotions and stickiness evaluations for a series of real-world websites. In addition, experts will rate a series of made-up websites that have also been manipulated to be either high or low in trust based on the design of the website and through the use of trusting endorsements and or symbols located on the website. The made-up websites will serve as a manipulation check to control for the reputation and or experience one may have with the web site that could be influencing the subject's trust ratings. A total of 24 websites with the highest and lowest construct evaluations will be selected. For the thin slice judgment, the participants will be exposed briefly (10 seconds) to the home page of the websites and then respond to a series of questions.

The participants will then be instructed to visit the websites within two weeks and explore their contents in order to collect information in their assignment sheet. After two weeks of using the websites at least three times, the subjects will be asked to

complete the instrument measuring their trust, emotional reaction and their willingness to spend time on the website. Structural equations modeling will be used for the analysis of results.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The anticipated findings of this research will provide valuable insights for both academic and practitioner communities. The findings may suggest that the initial brief exposure to a website may be significant in generating lasting evaluations of trust, emotion and stickiness that are critical for e-commerce success. Management would be advised to provide extra attention to the initial impression that their website is portraying to the online consumer. A number of trust mechanisms exist, which management may want to incorporate to depict a sense of trust to the online consumer. For the academic community, this research will extend prior thin slice findings to the online arena. The research extends the characteristics of what can exhibit the expressive behavior inherently defined in a thin slice. Prior research on thin slices has suggested that still frames do not qualify as thin slices (Ambady et al., 2000), however our study will suggest contrary to prior literature on thin slices that websites (which have characteristics of both static and still frames) can indeed qualify and support thin slice judgments.

CONCLUSION

Thin slices are an intriguing development within the psychology literature and marketing arena that is just starting to be recognized for their predictive accuracy. We believe thin slices can be applied across a wide variety of online contexts to spur future research. This paper will identify that thin slice judgments can be used by online consumers to evoke feelings of website trust, emotion and stickiness. In closing, brilliant military generals were said to possess “coup d’oeil”, which translated from French means “power of the glance”: the ability to immediately see and make sense of the battlefield (Gladwell, 2005). Similarly the thin slice judgments or “coup d’oeil” of the online consumer may be the necessary tool to survive the online battlefield.

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